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TAGS: PREL PINS PREF TH BM

SUBJECT: KAREN GROUPS SAY FIGHTING WON'T REACH REFUGEE CAMPS IN THAILAND

REF: A. CHIANG MAI 69, B. CHIANG MAI 66

CLASSIFIED BY: John Spykerman, Political Officer, CG Chiang Mai, Department of State.

REASON: 1.4 (d)

**¶1.** (C/NF) Fighting along the Thai-Burma border is unlikely to spill into the Mae La refugee camp in Thailand's Tak province, according to the ethnic factions involved in recent clashes. Karen groups on both sides of the conflict share an interest in protecting the camp and other Karen settlements on the Thai side of the border, which they see as sources of support.

**¶2.** (C/NF) The latest fighting erupted almost two weeks ago after a breakaway faction of the Karen National Union (KNU) sided with Burma's State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) and its ceasefire ally, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) (ref B). Those forces overran KNU positions in Burma's Karen State, opposite Thailand's Tak province, including one location near the Mae La refugee camp, home to more than 40,000 refugees. The fighting in the border areas subsided before the SE Asian New Year celebrations in Burma and Thailand this past week, although small skirmishes were reported further inside Karen State (see ref A).

**¶3.** (C/NF) Sources with the KNU and the Free Burma Rangers, an NGO that assists ethnic resistance groups in Burma with humanitarian operations, said that the positions lost in the recent fighting were on flat land and difficult to defend. KNU member Isaac Po likened the recent SPDC/DKBA advances to aggravating a beehive, echoing similar KNU sources who have suggested that their troops may now pursue guerilla tactics to retake positions or defend their remaining territory. Po, however, cautioned that there may be further attacks against the KNU on the border in the near future.

**¶4.** (C/NF) Free Burma Rangers sources told PolOff the DKBA now held most border territory south of the Mae La camp, due in part to the defection from the KNU of former 7th Brigade leader Htain Maung. These sources, however, said that KNU positions north of Mae La remained well protected and they did not see any danger to the Mae La camp, despite rumors to the contrary among the refugees living there.

**¶5.** (C/NF) Meanwhile, contacts with Htain Maung's breakaway "Peace Council" faction say they and their new allies have no plans to target refugee camps or other Karen groups living in Thailand, which they say are home to many of their supporters. If there are attacks against Karen living in Thailand, they say, they will be by KNU forces looking to frame Htain Maung, the SPDC, or the DKBA. One Peace Council source described last week's military skirmishes as Htain Maung re-asserting his

command of the 7th Brigade's territory.

CAMP